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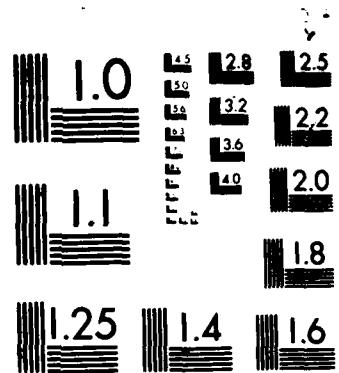
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# Human Resources Research

SUPERVISOR-SUBORDINATE AGREEMENT ON  
PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK: A FIELD  
STUDY

James B. Shaw  
and  
Cynthia D. Fisher

December, 1986

TR-ONR-7

Texas A&M University  
and  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute



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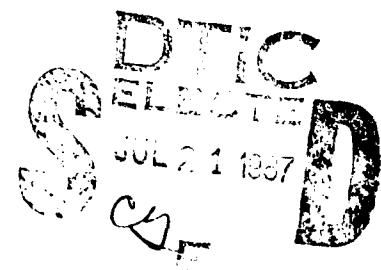
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19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)  Performance appraisal, performance feedback, supervisor-subordinate agreement.		
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remain in the organization, and greater commitment to the organization than low agreement. All hypotheses were supported.

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## **Supervisor-Subordinate Agreement on Performance**

### **Feedback: A Field Study**

The importance of feedback has been well documented by research in many areas. Aspects of the feedback process which have received relatively little attention are the extent to which subordinates agree with their superiors' assessments of their performance, the causes of agreement or disagreement, and the effects of level of agreement on subordinate attitudes, motivation, and behavior.

Subordinate self-assessment may be considered the "covert" side of performance appraisal and feedback. Subordinates undeniably have beliefs about their performance, although these beliefs are seldom explicitly reported. Many studies have shown that superiors and subordinates disagree about the subordinate's level of performance (Fisher & Russ, 1986; Thornton, 1980; Smircich & Chesser, 1981), with subordinates rating their performance higher than do their superiors (Baird, 1977; Brief, Aldag, & Van Sell, 1977; Holzbach, 1978; Klimoski & London, 1974; Shapiro & Dessler, 1985; Thornton, 1968).

#### **Factors Affecting Agreement**

Ilgen, Fisher, and Taylor (1979) point to the importance of subordinates accepting and agreeing

with performance feedback before they are likely to change their attitudes, intentions, and subsequent behavior. It seems that this agreement and acceptance might be produced in at least two ways.

First, superiors could independently arrive at the same assessment of performance as the subordinate. Subordinates tend to rate themselves quite positively. For example, Meyer (1980) found that 40-80% of subordinates placed themselves in the top 10% of their work group. Thus, superiors who give positive feedback are more likely to have subordinates who agree with their assessments than are superiors who give negative feedback. While few studies have specifically measured agreement, several studies have shown that positive feedback is more readily accepted than negative feedback (Jacobs, Jacobs, Feldman, and Cavior, 1973; Stone & Stone, 1985).

Agreement could also occur when the superior influences the subordinate's self-assessment in the direction of the superior's own assessment. This could happen if the superior gives feedback frequently, is perceived as a highly credible source of performance information, or when the feedback is clear and specific enough to be convincing. Landy, Barnes and Murphy (1978) verified that frequent feedback is seen as more accurate than infrequent

feedback. As to the credibility of the feedback source, Halperin, Snyder, Shenkel and Houston (1976) found that even negative feedback was accepted when it came from a highly credible source. For subordinates, the credibility of their superior probably depends on whether they perceive the superior as knowledgeable about the job, and whether the superior has had an adequate opportunity to observe their behavior on the job (Landy, Barnes & Murphy, 1978; Tuckman & Oliver, 1968; Stone, Gueutal & MacIntosh, 1984).

Note that these possible antecedents of agreement may not act independently. For example, several researchers have found that sources giving positive feedback are viewed as more credible than those giving negative feedback (Snyder & Shenkel, 1976; Steiner, 1968; Stone & Stone, 1982). Further, it seems likely that sources which are able to give clear and specific feedback may also be viewed as knowledgeable about the job and subordinate, and hence as highly credible sources of feedback.

Four hypotheses were tested concerning factors thought to affect subordinate agreement with feedback received from the superior. Hypothesis 1: Subordinates who agree with their superior will report having received feedback more frequently than subordinates who disagree with their superior. This

effect should occur regardless of the sign of the feedback, since frequent feedback will be more likely to change the subordinate's own perception of his/her performance in the direction of the superior's assessment. Hypothesis 2: Subordinates who agree with their superior will report having received more positive feedback than subordinates who disagree with their superior. Hypothesis 3: Subordinates who agree with their superior will report that the superior is a more credible source of feedback than subordinates who disagree. This effect should occur regardless of the sign of the feedback received. Hypothesis 4: Subordinates who agree with their superior will report having received more clear and specific feedback than subordinates who disagree with their superior.

#### Consequences Of Agreement

The level of agreement with the feedback received seems likely to affect subordinate outcomes such as expectancies, role conflict and ambiguity, satisfaction, intent to remain in the organization, and commitment.

Expectancies. Carver and Scheier (1981) have reviewed the literature on how feedback in general can trigger a reassessment of expectancy beliefs. Taylor, Fisher, and Ilgen (1984) have extended this analysis to performance feedback in organizations.

It seems likely that agreement with one's superior on performance levels achieved would facilitate the development of stronger, more certain expectancies, and would tend to reduce role conflict and role ambiguity because the superior and subordinate would agree on both the performance standards and performance level attained relative to those standards. Hypothesis 5: Subordinates who agree with their superior will report higher effort to performance expectancies and lower levels of role ambiguity and role conflict than will subordinates who disagree with their superior.

Satisfaction. Ilgen & Hamstra (1972) found that the effects of feedback on satisfaction depended partly on what feedback the subordinate expected and what was actually given. This expects-versus-gets notion seems extremely similar to our concept of agreement. Hypothesis 6a: Subordinates who agree with their superior will be more satisfied with their superior than subordinates who disagree.

Hypothesis 6b: Subordinates who agree with their superior will report higher levels of overall job satisfaction than subordinates who disagree.

Intent to remain and commitment. While many other factors influence intent to remain in the organization and commitment, it seems that agreement might also have some impact. Feeling that one's

performance is incorrectly assessed and not sufficiently appreciated by the organization may well weaken commitment. Hypothesis 7: Subordinates who agree with their superior will report greater intent to remain in the organization and higher levels of commitment than subordinates who disagree with their superior.

The effects of sign of feedback on reactions to feedback are strong and pervasive. Further, sign is expected to be associated with agreement. If agreement is an important construct, however, it must continue to account for variance even when sign is held constant. Hypothesis 8: The effects of agreement on expectancies, role conflict and ambiguity, satisfaction, intent to remain, and commitment will be significant regardless of the sign of the feedback.

#### Method

Data for this study were collected as part of a survey of performance feedback perceptions in a branch of the U. S. military.

#### Sample

Seven hundred and sixty-six individuals responded to the survey (60% response rate). Forty-two percent of the respondents were junior NCO's,

31% were senior NCO's, 15% were lieutenants or captains, and 12% were majors, lt. colonels, and colonels. A non-proportional, stratified sampling procedure was used to ensure that sufficient numbers of higher level officers were included in the sample. The average length of service for all respondents was 12.1 years.

#### Measurement Scales

A summary of the scales used in this study is presented in Table 1. Included in Table 1 are the names of the scales, number of items comprising the scale, coefficient alpha, and a sample item. The scale used to measure superior-subordinate agreement included 3 items which dealt with the subordinate's

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Insert Table 1 about here

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agreement with the superior's performance feedback in general, and one item measuring the agreement with the most recent performance evaluation. Single items were used to measure the absolute frequency of both formal and informal feedback. Source credibility was operationalized as the extent to which the subordinate perceived the superior as knowledgeable about the subordinate's job. The "feedback clarity" scale measured whether the superior was perceived as providing clear,

unambiguous, and specific feedback to the subordinate.

#### Procedure

The survey was conducted as part of a program to implement and evaluate a new performance counselling system in the service. This survey was conducted several months prior to the start of the new program. Potential respondents were identified by staff at the service headquarters in Washington. The survey was mailed along with a letter signed by the commanding general of the unit overseeing the development of the new counselling system, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

#### Results And Discussion

Analyses of variance and covariance were used to test the hypotheses in this study. Respondents were divided into high and low agreement groups based on their scores on the agreement scale. In the original items, a response of 1, 2 or 3 indicated some disagreement between superior and subordinate while responses of 4, 5 or 6 indicated some agreement. Mean agreement for all respondents was 4.57 ( $SD = 1.02$ ). Respondents whose scale scores were 4 or above were classified as "high

agreement" (mean agreement score = 5.07), those with scores of 3 or less were considered low agreement (mean agreement score = 2.37), and those with scores falling between 3 and 4 were excluded from the analyses.<sup>1</sup> The high and low agreement groups were significantly different from one another on level of agreement ( $p < .001$ ). ANOVA procedures were used to test the difference between the high and low agreement groups for means on each of the factors hypothesized to be related to agreement. In addition to the analysis of variance, an ANCOVA procedure was used to control for the sign of the feedback. The results of these analyses appear in Table 2.

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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The hypotheses regarding possible antecedents of agreement were all strongly supported with high agreement subordinates reporting that their superior was more credible and gave more frequent, positive, and clear feedback than low agreement subordinates. Credibility, frequency, and clarity remained significantly higher among agreeing than disagreeing subordinates even when the sign of the feedback was held constant.

It is impossible to determine causality in the natural setting in which this research occurred, and some reciprocal causality is certainly possible.

For instance, one may attribute credibility to a source after the source produces feedback consistent with one's self-assessment. Further, feedback matching the self-assessment may be seen as more clear, and may be more readily recalled and thus be perceived as having occurred more frequently.

Laboratory research will be necessary to unravel the exact causal sequence. Another area for further research concerns the processes involved in developing and maintaining a self-assessment of performance. Fisher and Russ (1986) have speculated extensively about these processes and identified a number of research questions. The hypothesized antecedents of agreement investigated in this study are only a small start in the direction of understanding self-assessment.

Evidence that understanding self-assessment is important comes from the hypothesized consequences of agreement reported in this paper. Subordinates who disagreed with their superiors reported lower expectancies, much less satisfaction with the superior, less overall satisfaction, less commitment, slightly less intention to remain in the organization, and more role conflict and ambiguity.

Again, causality is not certain, but it does seem reasonable that these reactions would follow from being rated lower on performance than one believed one should be rated. The fact that these results, with the exception of intent to remain, were still significant when the sign of feedback was held constant indicates that agreement itself is an important construct.

Definite disagreement (means of 3 and below) occurred in only 9% of our sample. The service in which this research was conducted has had a severe and long standing problem with leniency error in formal performance appraisals. Most individuals are rated in the two top categories of the performance rating scale, leaving little room for subordinates to feel under-rated. Disagreement is probably much more severe in civilian organizations, particularly those using the forced distribution method. Given the strong consequences of disagreement reported here, it seems likely that even greater problems will be experienced by organizations with more variance and lower mean performance ratings by superiors.

**Author Notes**

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**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Since this procedure produced a relatively small number of respondents in the low agreement group, an alternative procedure, splitting at essentially the mean, was also used to divide respondents into high agreement (over 4.55) and low agreement (under 4.5) groups. The results using this alternative splitting method were no different than those using the split based on scale anchors presented in the Table 2.

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Table 1

Summary Of Scales Used In The Study<sup>a</sup>Agreement Scale (4 items/alpha = .76)

Sample item: During feedback sessions my superior and I usually agree about what my performance level really is.

Frequency of Formal Feedback (1 item)<sup>b</sup>

In the past 6 months, how often has your senior sat down and given you formal feedback about your performance?

Frequency of Informal Feedback (1 item)<sup>b</sup>

In the past 6 months, how often has your senior informally given you comments, praise, advice, or constructive criticism on some aspect of your performance?

Credibility (3 items/alpha = .85)

My senior knows my job as well, or better than I do.

Sign of Feedback (3 items/alpha = .66)

Most of the feedback I get from my senior is positive.

Feedback Clarity (3 items/alpha = .81)

When my senior gives me feedback about my performance, it is clear and specific; I know exactly what he means.

E-P Expectancy (4 items/alpha = .58)

When I try hard, I can be an excellent performer.

Ambiguity (4 items/alpha = .77)<sup>c</sup>

I feel certain about how much authority I have.

Conflict (6 items/alpha = .75)<sup>c</sup>

I have to buck a rule to carry out an assignment.

Satisfaction with Supervisor (3 items/alpha = .90)

Overall, I am very satisfied with my senior.

Job Satisfaction (3 items/alpha = .73)

I enjoy my present job.

Intent to Remain (2 items/alpha = .71)

What are your intentions of remaining in the [service] for the next few years?

Commitment (3 items/alpha = .63)

The offer of more money from a civilian employer would not tempt me to leave the [service].

<sup>a</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all items used a 6-point, strongly disagree/strongly agree response scale. <sup>b</sup> A 5-point scale ranging from "not at all in the past 6 months" to "more than once a month." <sup>c</sup>

Adapted from Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970).

## Superior-Subordinate Agreement

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Table 2

ANOVA and ANCOVA Results For Major Variables<sup>a</sup>

<u>Variable</u>	Agreement					
	<u>High</u>		<u>Low</u>		<u>F1</u>	<u>F2</u>
<b>Frequency-</b>						
Formal.....	2.95	1.31	1.94	1.10	48.61	20.15
<b>Frequency-</b>						
Informal.....	3.98	1.16	2.59	1.59	65.09	35.26
Credibility...	4.40	1.16	2.57	1.32	773.78	89.28
<b>Sign of</b>						
Feedback.....	4.90	.75	3.26	1.29	168.57	
Clarity.....	5.13	.78	2.93	1.03	650.13	151.71
Expectancy....	4.91	.84	4.47	.87	14.04 <sup>b</sup>	11.18 <sup>b</sup>
Ambiguity.....	4.77	.81	3.30	1.15	209.50	66.05
Conflict.....	3.09	.98	3.93	.93	78.21	9.98 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Satisfaction-</b>						
Supervisor...	4.79	1.06	2.34	1.12	425.10	153.25
<b>Satisfaction-</b>						
Job.....	4.77	1.10	4.11	1.39	30.85	8.21 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Intent To</b>						
Remain.....	4.79	.97	4.35	1.47	5.00 <sup>c</sup>	1.83 <sup>d</sup>
Commitment....	4.27	1.18	3.47	1.37	38.23	13.58

Superior-Subordinate Agreement

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<sup>a</sup> F1 is the F-value for the ANOVA, F2 is the F-value for the ANCOVA with sign as the covariate. Unless otherwise indicated, all F-values are significant at  $p < .001$ .

Sample size for the high agreement group ranged from 532 to 539, and for the low agreement group from 63 to 65.

<sup>b</sup>  $p < .01$ . <sup>c</sup>  $p < .05$ . <sup>d</sup> not significant.

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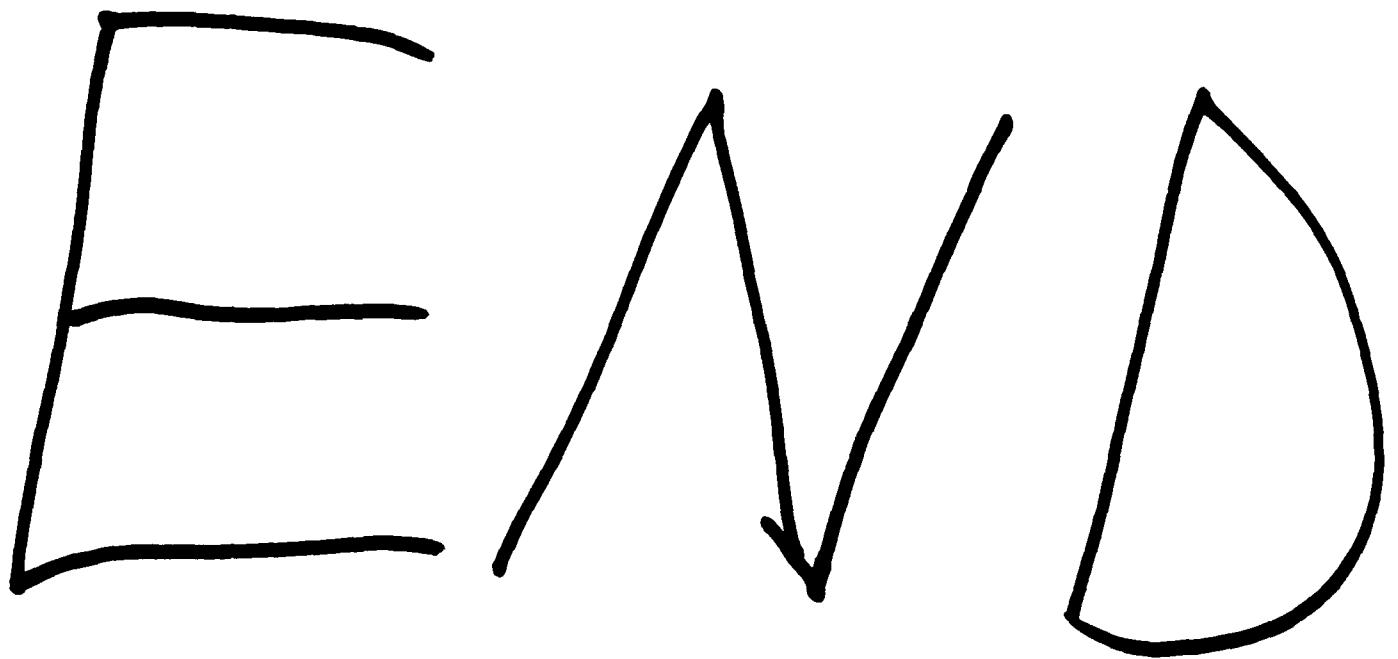
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